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Tribe remains tight lipped

As the city scrambles to replace the Navajo Nation Department of Behavioral Health Services, the current entity running Gallup Detox Center, the Oct. 3 deadline given by the tribe looms closer with each passing day.

The city sent out an emergency Request For Proposals in the hopes of getting a qualified entity to take over by the deadline.

The Nation submitted their termination letter to the city Sept. 3. According to the memorandum between the Nation and the city, the original termination date was set for Oct. 31, 2018.

Tribal officials remain tightlipped, failing to provide an explanation for their withdrawal. District 2 City Councilor Allan Landavazo said, “the reasons for the Navajo Nation terminating their contract early remain unclear.”

Several attempts were made by phone to contact the director of the Gallup Detox Center. The first attempt confirmed the director as Vera John, a clinical director for the Navajo Nation Department of Health.

Further attempts were made the next day to speak with John, or a staff member, to discuss the reasons for dissolving their contract early. Staff at the center provided little information. One secretary said over the phone that she couldn't confirm, or deny, John was the director of the Gallup Detox Center.

"We're afraid of getting into trouble by giving out information," she said.

Gallup Detox Center didn't return a call or provide a statement in response.

The city notified three potential operators for the temporary, five-month position: Rehoboth-McKinley Christian Hospital, Dr. Laughter, and NCI, also known as Na'nihzhoozhi Center, Inc.

NCI was the former operator of the facility before the Navajo Nation took over. Proposals were due Sept. 17 at 5 pm.

No word yet on who will take over the center, but Navajo Nation Behavioral Health did show the building to at least three potential candidates, Landavazo said. Gallup Detox Center falls in his district.

Gallup City Attorney George Kozeliski said with the temporary placement of an organization to run the center, the city can take its time to look for a company that will take the reins for the long haul.

“It won’t be an emergency at that point; we have time to search,” he said.

The city will have until March 1 to find a permanent entity to run the detox center.

On Sept. 17, it was reported by Kozeliski that the city received five to six proposals in response to the emergency RFP.

Francis Rodriguez in purchasing is handling the arrangements. But, she is out of the office until sometime in the afternoon, at a training, Kozeliski said in an email, near press time.

Some History

The Navajo Nation has managed the facility since Nov. 4, 2013. Landavazo didn’t know the exact amount the Navajo Nation spent on the center, “but believes it is over $500,000.”

According to the memorandum between Gallup and the Navajo Nation, facility maintenance was key. The Nation agreed to initial costs of $350,000 to ensure the facility was up to code. Gallup agreed to assist with $320,000 and working with the county to provide 10 percent each of the Liquor Excise Tax.

The former operators of NCI were with the center from the beginning, but they had funding issues, Landavazo said. It’s unclear if they will continue to have funding issues should they take over for the Navajo Nation.

To add, Kozeliski said that NCI stripped the center to the walls.

“The Navajo Nation has replaced the ceiling tiles, painted, put [in] new flooring, an entire new video security system, furniture, [and] fixtures. When they leave, it will be in 100 percent better

shape than when they came in," Kozeliski said. "The Navajo Nation took on the remodeling of the center and stepped up to the plate."

Several attempts were made to reach Mayor Jackie McKinney for comment, with no response.

A VITAL INSTITUTION?

"Everyone wants the detox center to continue," Landavazo said. "The city will work with whomever to keep it open."

There are two wrongful death suits filed against the Gallup Detox Center, also naming the City of Gallup and McKinley County as defendants.

One case in particular, the death of Harold Lee, 51, is currently being heard in U.S. District Court. Lee was found in the main holding room of the facility, face down and unresponsive June 15, 2014.

Benjamin Yazzie died at the facility Nov. 6, 2014, and his case is at McKinley County District Court. Both men's cause of death is listed as "acute ethanol toxicity."

Several attempts were made to reach the Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye or Vice President Jonathan Nez through press officer Mihio Manus.

In an email from Rick Abasta, OPVP Communications Director, Begaye and Nez were testifying in Washington, D.C. on the Gold King Mine spill. They did not return repeated calls, or emails, to discuss the reasons for the tribe exiting their contract early.

They also did not release a public statement concerning the issue, at the time of publication.

In the letter to the city and county, dated Sept. 3, Begaye and Nez, stated: “We enjoyed the opportunity given to the Nation to assist the City of Gallup and McKinley County and hope to continue these partnerships in the future on other projects and services for our people.”